Enlightened Sectarianism
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Before coming to the main premise, let me share a quaint analogy that came to mind this week appertaining (I always wanted to use that word and never found a sensible place to do so. Still haven't.) to the venerable history of the Sanatana Dharma. Imagine that the great world religions are people, members of a one family. If we say that 100 years of history equals one year in our analogy, then Hinduism has reached the patriarchic age of 60 (some say he lost his birth certificate and is actually much older, possibly 90 or 100). Judaism is 37. Shintoism has just turned 30, and Zoroastrianism is 26. Clustered at 25 are Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism and Confucianism. Christianity is 19[?] and Islam 14. Sikhism is the youngest at 5.

Having anthropomorphized religion, let's turn to our primary and somewhat perilous premise: Hindus everywhere must support sectarianism-not our own limited variation, but everybody's. Similarly, if we wish to protect our own right to free speech, we must grant it to others. By honoring and accepting another man's path, we protect our own precious faith, whether we are devotees of Vishnu, Sakti or Siva.

That seems reasonable, you say. What's so perilous about such a premise? Well, it has become fashionable to pooh-pooh sectarian beliefs. Largely due to the strategies of the British, later adopted by Hindu liberals and Smartas, the word sectarianism has become verbal graffiti. Mind you, this word is nothing when set beside the term communalism, an utterance that can cower the most courageous captains of government, that can silence the most sassy Hindu speechifier. When properly enunciated, communalism is the only 11-letter entry in the Oxford Unabridged that sounds exactly like a four-letter word. Frankly, Hindus should be urged to ignore the word which produces heat but no light. Better yet, we propose a moratorium on the word-for the next ten years no one should be allowed to use it without a license. Too many have shot themselves in the foot playing with a loaded Maxim.

Back then to sectarianism. Next time you are in a group with a liberal Hindu, watch closely. You will see him or her wince noticeably whenever a devotee speaks adoringly of Vishnu, Siva or Sakti. Liberals would prefer we all use generic terms when referring to God, harmless monikers like Divinity or, better yet, noncommittal pronouns such as that. They reason this is good because people will then not pit their God against their neighbor's, assuming in the course of their argument that somehow two Gods must exist if man has two names for God.

It is an irony that those Hindus who wish to destroy sectarianism are working night and day to impose their own brand of Vedanta upon the world. These liberal Hindus call a Siva bhakti "sectarian" in hopes he will relinquish his love of Siva and embrace their love of Vedanta. This sect is organized to destroy sectarianism, to replace your view of religion with theirs. The curious thing here is that the Siva bhakti is willing to wholeheartedly accept the Vedantin's right to believe as he chooses, while the "liberal" is too dogmatic to return the honor, and thus becomes, despite shrill protestations, the least open-minded and universalist among men. He also becomes, as Ram Swarup cogently notes in this issue's MY TURN, an unwitting instrument of the disintegration of Hinduism. We would coax those who wish to stifle another man's belief to take a quick look around, to see the beauty (and the necessity) of nature's diversity, to imagine a rainbow with just one color, even if it's their favorite hue. Truly, the world is richer for man's diverse spiritual prospects.

In this regard I pose a question for those among our gourmet readers who ponder ponderous matters like sectarianism and its place in the Technological Age: What do faith and food have in common? The answer, of course, is provincial spice. Why this is the answer anon.

Consider how ambivalent the world is about religion. On the one hand we revere it as the highest in us and the most profound. It helps us to seek the light within, to comprehend our relationship with God and with this temporal comer of a fairly ordinary galaxy. In brief, religion guides us to know our Self. On the other hand, it is mankind's surest excuse for bigotry, disputation and even holy war. At its best religion is spirituality-an interior, highly intimate relationship of man and God. At its worst, it is dogma, disputatiousness and doggery.

A moment's look at history proves this has always been so. While a, few men embrace religion as spirit or mystical revelation, many espouse it for political, social or ego-gratifying purposes. America's Founding Fathers, who are getting so

much press during this 200th anniversary of the Constitution, were wary of the perils of proselytization and yet managed to hold their personal faith (largely deism) strong while Grafting a truly pluralistic nation where believers and doubters have equal place.

The fact is that for religion to be spiritual, it must be sectarian-not blind and mindless parochialism, but faithful adherence to a path, a body of spiritual principles and practices. As soon as religion is everything for everybody (wholly non-sectarian), it becomes a generalized, watered-down nothing much. That is the fatal flaw in the liberal Hindu movement and in the ecumenical dream of a One World Religion. Remember, for that religion to be mine, it must destroy yours.

No doubt about it, true sectarianism is good. It is necessary. It is a celebration of custom, conviction and divine diversity. The greatest of the world's religious leaders, saints and sages have been staunchly sectarian. Recall Swami Vivekananda's astute observation that Ramakrishna's one-pointed love and devotion to Goddess Sakti had, in some mysterious manner beyond the young skeptic's vision, created a truly complete and illumined being, his guru. Enlightened sectarianism is benign and non-proselytizing. Far from being the blight which the enemies of dharma proclaim, it is dharma's true strength.

If it is difficult to think of religious diversity in this way, then consider another of man's great loves-food. Ethnic chefs are proud of their regional dishes, though they openly relish the foods of other nations. What a dull, insipid world this would be if we eliminated all "unorthodox" cuisine and had only Earth Food or Purina People Chow, a one Universal Meal which was neither French nor Chinese, neither Indian nor Italian, neither Japanese nor Javanese. The bland, unappetizing result would be as ineffective as Esperanto, the one-world language, as unappealing as a religion devoid of its unique color and piquancy. Thus in both faith and food the gourmet's secret ingredient is provincial spice. Hindus should know that it's OK to proudly savor both our food and our religion, while still knowing ours is not the only thing on the menu.